

SOLID-STATE IMAGING APPARATUS

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

5 1. Field of the Invention:

The present invention relates to a solid-state imaging apparatus having an exposure control function.

2. Description of the Related Art:

10 Fig. 1 is a block diagram showing a structure of an imaging apparatus using a CCD image sensor. Fig. 2 is a timing chart illustrating operation of the imaging apparatus of Fig. 1.

15 A CCD image sensor 1 comprises a plurality of light receiving pixels, a plurality of vertical transfer registers, and, generally, one horizontal shift register. The plurality of light receiving pixels are arrayed with constant intervals on a light receiving plane, on which an optical image of an object is formed. Each light receiving pixel generates and accumulates therein information charges corresponding to the formed image. The vertical shift registers, each arranged to correspond to a light receiving pixel column, read information charges accumulated in the respective
20 light receiving pixels for sequential transfer in the vertical direction. The horizontal shift register, arranged on the output side of the vertical shift registers, receives information charges from the plurality of vertical shift registers, and transfers them
25 for every light receiving pixel row, whereby an image signal Y,

the voltage value of which differs according to the amount of information charges accumulated in each light receiving pixel, is output.

A driving circuit 2 supplies various transfer clocks to each shift register of the CCD 1 in response to synchronous signals such as VD, HD, supplied from a timing control circuit 3 (described below).

For example, in response to a vertical synchronous signal VD, the driving circuit 2 generates a frame transfer clock ϕF , and supplies one to vertical shift registers. In response to a clock ϕF ,

information charges accumulated in the plurality of light receiving pixels are taken into the vertical shift registers for every vertical scanning period. In response to a horizontal synchronous signal HD, the driving circuit 2 generates an accumulation transfer clock ϕS and a horizontal transfer clock ϕH , and supplies ones to the vertical shift registers and the horizontal shift register.

In response to these clocks ϕS , ϕH , the vertical and horizontal shift registers transfer the information charges stored therein, so that information charges in the vertical shift registers are output for every horizontal light receiving row via the horizontal shift register. In response to a shutter timing signal ST supplied from the timing control circuit 3, the driving circuit 2 generates a discharge clock ϕD , and supplies one to a drain region of the CCD 1, via which to discharge unnecessary charges. With the above arrangement, information charges accumulated in the light receiving pixels of the CCD 1 can all be discharged to the drain

region. The time period from the end of a discharge clock ϕD to the beginning of a frame transfer clock ϕF , defined as a time L , correspond to a period for information charges to be accumulated in the CCD 1, or an exposure time.

5 The timing control circuit 3 divides a reference clock of a predetermined cycle to thereby generate a vertical synchronous signal VD for determining a CCD 1 vertical scanning timing, and a horizontal synchronous signal HD for determining a CCD 1 horizontal scanning timing. For example, for the NTSC method, the
10 timing control circuit 3 has a structure for dividing a 14.32 MHz reference clock by 910 to thereby generate a horizontal synchronous signal HD, and for dividing a resultant horizontal synchronous signal HD by 252.5 to thereby generate a vertical synchronous signal.

15 An integration circuit 4 is reset in response to a vertical synchronous signal VD, and integrates an image signal Y from the CCD 1 for every vertical scanning period to thereby generate integration information I, which is proportional to an average level of the image signal Y. An exposure determination circuit 5 compares, for every vertical scanning period, integration information I
20 received from the integration circuit 4 and upper and lower values of a suitable exposure range, and raises either an exposure suppression signal CL or an exposure promotion signal OP according to the comparison result. Specifically, for integration information I exceeding the upper value, an exposure suppression
25 signal CL is risen, while, for the integration information I not reaching the lower value, an exposure promotion signal OP is risen.

An up-down counter 6 stores information of a timing for a shutter timing signal St to rise, by means of the number of a horizontal scanning line. Specifically, the up-down counter 6 is counted up in response to a rise of an exposure suppression signal CL, and counted down in response to a rise of an exposure promotion signal OP. That is, for every vertical scanning period V, a shutter timing signal ST is risen at a time when the number of horizontal scanning periods, the number being designated by the up-down counter 6, have passed. A latch 7 latches a count value of the up-down counter 6 for every vertical scanning period in response to a vertical synchronism signal VD, and supplies the latched value information as exposure information D to the timing control circuit 3.

In a solid-state imaging apparatus of the above structure, the up-down counter 6 is counted up or down for every screen according to the level of an integration value I of an image signal Y. This arrangement allows adjustment of an exposure time L for every vertical scanning period through extension or reduction in unit of one horizontal scanning period.

The above structure for exposure time adjustment, however, requires a certain amount of time before optimum exposure condition is can be attained for a solid-state image sensor when the power is switched on or brightness of the object is abruptly changed.

That is, as an exposure time for a CCD 1 is extended or reduced at a predetermined rate for every vertical scanning period, a significant difference between the exposure time at the beginning of exposure control and an optimum exposure time prevents instant

adjustment to the optimum exposure time, and might results in a long period being required to complete the exposure control operation. Although adjustment of an exposure time at a larger ratio for every vertical scanning period could hasten and thus
5 complete an exposure control operation in a shorter time, such adjustment would be excessively sensitive to variation of object brightness, which may cause excessive extension or reduction of an exposure time, and resultantly makes unstable exposure control.

10 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention has been conceived to overcome the above problems and aims to achieve stable exposure control operation that completes in a short time.

15 Specifically, according to the present invention, there is provided a solid-state imaging apparatus, comprising a solid-state image sensor having a plurality of light receiving elements arrayed thereon, for accumulating in each of the plurality of light receiving elements information charges according to a received
20 object image; a driving circuit for discharging the information charges accumulated in each of the plurality of light receiving elements of the solid-state image sensor, and for outputting, after a predetermined period, information charges accumulated in each of the plurality of light receiving elements whereby an image signal
25 according to the information charges is obtained; first exposure information generating circuit for detecting a level of

the image signal in a predetermined cycle to generate first exposure information which is increased or decreased based on a detection result; second exposure information generating circuit for calculating second exposure information based on the level of the image signal; selecting circuit for selecting either the first exposure information or the second exposure information; and timing control circuit for setting discharge timing and output timing to the driving circuit; wherein the selecting circuit selects the second exposure information during a predetermined period, and subsequently selects the first exposure information.

According to the present invention, as an optimum exposure time of a solid-state imaging apparatus is set when second exposure information is selected, exposure control can complete instantly irrespective of the duration of the preceding exposure time. The first exposure information is thereafter selected so that the exposure time for the solid-state imaging apparatus can be adjusted into one for optimum exposure condition for every vertical scanning period through extension or reduction at a predetermined rate.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above and other objects, features, and advantages of the present invention will become further apparent from the following description of the preferred embodiment taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings wherein:

Fig. 1 is a block diagram showing a structure of a conventional imaging apparatus ;

Fig. 2 is a timing chart for explaining operation of the conventional imaging apparatus ;

5 Fig. 3 is a block diagram showing a structure of an imaging apparatus according to the present invention; and

Fig. 4 is a timing chart for explaining operation of the imaging apparatus according to the present invention.

10 DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Fig. 3 is a block diagram showing a structure of a solid-state imaging apparatus in a preferred embodiment of the present invention. Fig. 4 is a timing chart illustrating operation of the apparatus of Fig. 3.

15 The CCD 1, the driving circuit 2, and the timing control circuit 3 have identical structures as described referring to Fig. 1. That is, the CCD 1 is driven in response to pulses from the driving circuit 2, and outputs an image signal Y, the driving circuit 2 operating in response to an output from the timing control circuit 3.

20 This solid-state imaging apparatus is characterized in that a first exposure information D1 and a second exposure information D2 are switched between them to be supplied to the timing control circuit 3, a first exposure information D1 is used for stepwise extension or reduction of an exposure time L of the CCD at a predetermined rate, and a second exposure information D2 is used

for direct designation of an exposure time L for optimum exposure condition. In this apparatus, the second exposure information D2 is selected and supplied to the timing control circuit 3 at the beginning of operation of the imaging apparatus, and then switched to the first exposure information D1 after a lapse of a predetermined time.

An integration circuit 11, identical to the integration circuit 4 in Fig. 1, integrates an image signal Y supplied from the CCD 1 for every vertical scanning period to thereby generate integration information I, which is proportional to an average level of the image signal Y. An exposure determination circuit 12 compares the integration information I supplied from the integration circuit 11, and upper and lower values of an optimum exposure range, and raises either an exposure suppression signal CL or an exposure promotion signal OP according to the comparison result. That is, the exposure determination circuit 12 rises an exposure suppression signal CL when the integration information I exceeds the upper value, and rises an exposure promotion signal OP when the integration information I does not reach the lower value.

An up-down counter 13 is counted up in response to the rise of an exposure suppression signal CL, and counted down in response to the rise of an exposure promotion signal OP, so that first exposure information D1 for designating a timing for a shutter timing signal ST to rise, by means of the number of a horizontal scanning line, is output. After the counter 17 is reset, second exposure information D2, prepared in the timing calculation circuit

14, is set to the up-down counter 13 for initialization. Note that first exposure information D1 is updated for every vertical scanning period, and the value of the information D1 is increased or decreased at a predetermined rate for every vertical scanning period whereby
5 an exposure time L for the CCD 1 is extended or reduced by a predetermined time period for every vertical scanning period. The determination circuit 12 and the up-down counter 13 together constitute a first exposure information generation circuit.

The timing calculation circuit 14 holds exposure information
10 D corresponding to the current exposure time L for the CCD 1, and calculates second exposure information D2 for designating an optimum exposure time, based on an integration value I relative to the held exposure information D, and an optimum value R0, which is set corresponding to optimum exposure condition. That is,
15 second exposure information D2 for designating an optimum exposure time is calculated as

$$D2=R0 \cdot D/I$$

20 The second exposure information D2 is calculated in response to specification of an integration value I and exposure information D indicative of then exposure time L, for direct designation of a timing for a shutter timing signal ST to rise. The timing calculation circuit 14 constitutes a second exposure information
25 generation circuit.

The selection circuit 15, which is connected to the up-down

counter 13 and the timing calculation circuit 14, selects either first exposure information D1 or second exposure information D2 in response to a switch control signal SC. The counter 17, which is reset in response to activation of the imaging apparatus or a trigger automatically or manually input at a desired timing, counts vertical synchronous signals VD. When the count value reaches a predetermined value, a switch control signal SC for reversing the condition, is output. Specifically, the counter 17 may be of 14 bits, and the uppermost bit of a count output is used as a switch control signal SC. With this arrangement, a switch control signal SC is maintained at L-level after resetting of the counter 17 and in the following eight vertical scanning periods V0 to V7, during which period second exposure information D2 is selected. During a subsequent vertical scanning period V8 and thereafter, the switch control signal SC is risen to H level so that first exposure information D1 is selected. A latch 16 latches exposure information D1/D2 having selectively output from the selection circuit 15, at a timing according to a vertical synchronous signal VD, and supplies the information as exposure information D to the timing control circuit 3 and the timing calculation circuit 14.

With the above imaging apparatus, in response to resetting of the counter when, for example, the power is switched on and so on, second exposure information, generated by the timing calculation circuit 14, is supplied to the up-down counter 13 as well as to the timing control circuit 3. With this arrangement, an exposure time for the CCD 1 can be determined instantly at an

optimum duration, and the up-down counter 13 is accordingly set to have a counter value corresponding to the duration. Then, such exposure control is repeated during a predetermined time to stabilize operation of the respective sections before the second exposure information D2 is switched to first exposure information D1 in response to a rise of a switch control signal SC.

As an alternative, the counter 17 may be reset in response to a trigger supplied in response to a switch which is operated by an operator of the imaging apparatus, differing from a power-on reset as described above.

As described above, the present invention enables instant completion of exposure control, even immediately after the power being switched on or when object brightness is varied significantly. Stable exposure control is thereby ensured.